

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

**Chef:** Fabienne Eymard  
**Residence:** Bronx, NY  
**Restaurant:** pinch American Grill, Yonkers

At first, striding through the clanging, beeping deluge of Empire City Casino at Yonkers Raceway to meet Fabienne Eymard, I wondered how this child of the farm, of the storybook French southwest, had found a home here. I don't wonder anymore: She's all about courage and challenge, about self-belief.

Raised amidst vegetable gardens and barnyard animals, helping her father with the slaughter and her mother at the stove, she was making cakes and confit by the age of 6. There were pâtés, foie gras, rillettes, and terrines. Since her mother preferred savory cooking, little Fabienne explored pastry. "I tried everything: cakes for my dad, who loved sweets—*baba au rhum* was his favorite," she recalls. "I was about five; it's one of my first memories." She sculpted the pyramid-like *pièce montée*, with its trove of vanilla cream and caramel sauce, from pâte à choux dough, and formed profiteroles with the ice-cream machine her mother bought her at age 10. "My childhood was all about food," Eymard says. "It was a passion. I always knew my job would be as a cook." But her parents disagreed: Restaurant kitchens were no place for a girl. "My parents were teachers and wanted me work in an office. They felt being a cook was too many hours, too difficult. They told me I had to graduate high school and were sure I'd change my mind." She didn't. Graduation achieved, she headed for nearby Toulouse and culinary school.

Within six months, at her first restaurant apprenticeship, Eymard's destiny was confirmed. "I knew the kitchen was my place," she says. It took a few more years for her parents to come around, but by then, she was off to her first job in a small village next to Marseille. Six months later, she set her sights on Paris, a country girl no longer. "Everything in the restaurant business happens there," she says. She stayed six years, many of them at the venerable Michelin-starred Taillevent, where she was one of two females out of 25 cooks. I cringed at the stereotypic patriarchal tyranny this demure, soft-spoken woman must have endured. "I'd go home sometimes

**Chef Speak**

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and cry," Eymard admits. "But I was very proud, very strong, and never showed them my emotion. The management team was fair and supportive, and that's all that mattered." She hesitates a moment, and then: "I can adapt anywhere. I can always find a way to be at peace." And, voila: her mantra. It saw her through the next transition, an about-face to a two-person kitchen in a Swiss mountainside-village hotel with her best Taillevent *ami*. Did she miss the big city? "I loved being back in the country," she says. "Every day, the scenery was a new picture." And then that mantra again: "I always love a new challenge, a new situation. It makes me feel alive."

Yet the biggest challenge lay ahead. "I always dreamed about coming to America. It's common in Europe; we have your movies, your music. I wanted to learn English. And I wanted to see what Americans eat." Did she think it was all hamburgers? She did. "My image was of fast food. American chefs are not known in Europe; I had no idea about amazing people like Thomas Keller or Peter Kelly." Eymard soon found out while working at Alain Ducasse's Adour in Washington, DC, then at his New York Adour and Benoit. The appointment to executive chef at the Ducasse consultancy project pinch a year and a half ago was another test, and another personal triumph—the least of which is leading a kitchen full of men who are, she says, twice my size but so respectful. "The menu here is something totally different; I have to adapt what I like to cook with what the customer likes to eat." (Side note: She cooked a few things for me, and this customer liked!) "I'm here to make people happy," she says. "So I have to find a way."

Something tells me that won't be a problem.

—Diane Weintraub Pohl



Among Eymard's multiple stints at Ducasse properties was Benoit in Manhattan.

SPICE RACK

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

**[Dropwort]**



aka...  
 aka water dropwort, fine-leaved water dropwort, water fennel, Japanese parsley

Flavor Strength



**Description:** A perennial plant in the genus of plants in the family Apiaceae that grows in damp ground (i.e., marshes); the leaves have a mild, pleasant taste similar to celery and can be used parsley is used as a garnish.

**You Might Like To Know:**

Several of the species, including hemlock water dropwort, are extremely poisonous when ingested, having tuberous roots and yellow flowers. Scientists at the University of Eastern Piedmont in Italy purport this neurotoxic plant is the most-likely candidate used for the ritual killing of elderly people who could no longer care for themselves in ancient Sardinia. The expression "sardonic grin," used to describe a disparaging smile, has its roots in this Sardinian practice, as toxic alcohols in the plant can cause facial muscles to contract, sometimes contorting into a mocking (sardonic) smile or grin.

—JBT

BENOIT PHOTO BY MICHAEL PIAZZA

SIZZLING...  
**Watercress**



HEATING...  
**Chicory**

FIZZLING...  
**Kale**